

Orca Network's "Whale Sighting Network"

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Orca Network

Abstract

Orca Network's Whale Sighting Network is a unique and effective way to increase awareness of and knowledge about the Southern Resident Community of orcas (J, K and L pods).

This population of orcas has declined a disturbing 20% over the past six years. The decline is a reflection of the same issues facing most Northwest marine and watershed ecosystems: decreasing salmon runs, PCB contamination, and the effects of a rapidly increasing human population.

Through this network, whale observations are gathered and disseminated to researchers and volunteers, and posted on our website. Among the 600 network participants are waterfront homeowners, boaters, students, researchers, government agencies, whale watch operators, environmental organizations, elected officials, media, and concerned citizens.

Results of this project include an expanded database of transboundary orca sightings, particularly during winter months, to help determine the movements, behavior, and population trends of this at-risk orca community. Through daily email reports, monthly educational programs, and a dynamic website, participants become aware of issues threatening orcas and the greater Salish Sea ecosystem.

Learning about these issues through the eyes of an orca reaches out to those beyond the choir, inspiring and motivating citizen action to protect orcas, salmon, and their habitats.

Outline of Presentation

Introduction

The Orca Network was co-founded by Howard Garrett and Susan Berta and located on Whidbey Island, WA.

I'm not a scientist; I'm a networker. Conferences always talk about how to get scientific information out to the public. I'm glad to be here to give one example of how we're trying to do that.

Today I'll be talking about our Whale Sighting Network, which is an example of the linking or interdependence Elizabeth Dowdeswell spoke of in the keynote address on Monday, linking science/humanities/policy/people/action.

Orca Network Programs

- Whale Sighting Network
- Educational Programs and Materials
- Marine Mammal Stranding Program
- The "Free Lolita" Campaign

GOT WHALES?

Call 1-866-ORCANET (672-2638)

To Report Whale Sightings

To be on our Whale Sighting email list, contact: susan@orcanetwork.org

visit our website at: www.orcanetwork.org

Need/Current Issues

The Southern Resident orca population declined 20% over a 6-year period. This is a direct reflection of the issues facing the greater Puget Sound ecosystem:

- Declining salmon runs
- PCB's and toxic pollution
- Effects of a rapidly increasing human population and encroaching

Background

- Awareness of frequent whale sightings around Whidbey and Camano Islands
- Began as small informal network of friends sharing whale sightings
- By alerting researchers in San Juan Islands and Seattle about whales in the area, we could increase opportunities for observation and ID
- Result is increased knowledge and data

How the Network Has Grown

- Participants from Puget Sound, San Juan Islands, Olympic Peninsula, Canadian Gulf Islands and beyond.
- As number of sightings increased, more researchers, agencies, and organizations became involved, creating a diverse audience.
- The Network now has more than 825 subscribed participants, and many more who view or submit sightings via our website and toll free number (1-866-ORCANET).

Sighting Network Participants

- Researchers
- Government Agencies, including:
 - National Marine Fisheries Service
 - National Marine Mammal Laboratory
 - Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans
- U.S. Navy
- U.S. Coast Guard
- M3 (DFO/Veins of Life Marine Program)
- Soundwatch (The Whale Museum)
- Northwest Whale Watch Operators Association
- Whale Watch Naturalists
- Foss Maritime Tug Captains
- Washington State Ferries
- The Whale Museum
- The Center for Whale Research
- Media
- Elected officials
- Waterfront residents and business owners
- Environmental organizations and non-governmental organizations
- Professors, teachers, students of all ages

Sighting Network Goals

- Increase data gathered on Puget Sound orcas and gray whales.
- Increase shore-based whale watching.
- Increase knowledge and awareness.
- Share information amongst a diverse group of participants.
- Assist with unusual events and strandings.
- Increase collaboration and cooperation.

Increase data gathered on Puget Sound orcas and gray whales through the Whale Sighting Network.

“Whale Sighting Network reports and observations will be added to the annual data collected by the Center for Whale Research staff in their ongoing research of the Southern Resident Community of orcas. Especially helpful are the off-season, south Puget Sound reports that come in through the Sighting Network, providing valuable information about the movements of this community during the winter months”

Ken Balcomb, *Executive Director*
The Center for Whale Research
San Juan Island, WA

2001 Statistics

- 710 Total Reports
- Average of 59 reports/month
- Low=14 (February)
- High=105 (April)
- Most reports in April (105), September (86), October (80), August (71)

2002 Statistics

- 723 Total Reports
- Average of 60 reports/month
- Low=15 (February)
- High=123 (April)
- Most reports in April (123), May (80), December (79), June (70)

2003 Statistics

- January = 124 Reports
- February = 104 Reports
- March = 127 Reports at press time

Increase opportunities for shore-based whale watching

"Thank you very much for these orca alerts. I rush to see them every time I hear, and my daughter finally got a good look at them. She was so excited, and I am very grateful."

Lisa Harkins

Greenbank, WA

Increase knowledge and awareness of the critical issues affecting Puget Sound orcas and other whales

Educational Value:

- Revealed by feedback from network participants
- Questions answered by researchers and government experts, providing important link between scientists and the public
- News, rare sightings and events, population trends, research findings, and government management plans easily shared via email list and website

Knowledge and awareness:

- Motivate citizens to take action
- Encourage political support and legislation
- Raise awareness of whales and related issues
- Make people think about what they do in terms of their impacts on Puget Sound
- Help people realize how fortunate we are to have whales around, and how fragile the relationship is between whales, humans and habitats

Via the Whale Sighting Network and Orca Network website, the latest observations, research, and whale issues are shared amongst environmental organizations, government agencies, researchers, elected officials, whale watch operators and naturalists, students, educators, and the general public.

"An important partner in the Salish Sea region's ability to monitor the health of its whale populations, especially the Southern Resident population of killer whales...."

Primarily due to the rapid information exchange provided by the Orca Network, regional scientists and the public have been able to track the orcas nearly continuously over the last two winters, and document unusual shifts in their movement patterns and by sewing together the loose fabric of sighting networks in the region, and providing a central exchange of information from all the sighting networks that is more immediate and more personal for the participants."

Richard Osborne, Ph.D.

The Whale Museum, Friday Harbor, WA

Assist with unusual events and strandings

“Orca Network has already proved to be very useful in alerting the scientific community to the existence of a lone, juvenile killer whale in Puget Sound. I would anticipate that future incidents involving sick or injured cetaceans may come to light as a result of this network.”

John K.B. Ford, PhD

*Marine Mammal Research Program, Pacific Biological Field Station,
Nanaimo, Canada*

“Thank you for your great (and always very fair) coverage of Springer’s adventures over the last six months! We do appreciate it! Also, your regular sighting reports provide a great way to follow the chronology of events...I save them all, and have referred to them on several occasions to figure out dates and details!”

Lance Barrett-Lennard, PhD.

*Vancouver Aquarium,
Vancouver, Canada*

Increase collaboration and cooperation in efforts to clean up the Salish Sea, restore salmon runs, and preserve our threatened orca populations

“Thanks for the orca sightings announcements. We love knowing where they are and where they’re heading. As you say, it’s a pleasure, a blessing, and an honor to have these orcas as our neighbors. Let’s hope the new millennium brings determined awareness to protect them and their home waters.”

Kay Padden

Anacortes, WA

Keeping up with the Whales

Now onto what it’s like, trying to keep track of the whales...

Sighting Events of Note

- Dungeness Transient Stranding, January 2002.
- Lone baby orca reported in Swinomish Channel, early January 2002; and again near Edmonds, swimming next to a Foss tug boat.
- Lone pseudorca, showing up around the same time as the above baby orca sightings.
- And another lone baby orca—L98 lives!
- Humpback whales, one observed and photographed by Ken Balcomb off the Kitsap Peninsula; more reported off Vancouver Island.
- Large pods of “Offshore” orcas have visited Port Townsend, Vancouver Island, the San Juan Islands and possibly as far in as Saratoga Passage.
- Resident Gray Whales frequent Whidbey and Camano Islands in the spring to feed on ghost shrimp in the mudflats.
- New orca calves: L101, L102, K35 and J38 (L102 no longer with us).
- “Springer,” the relocated orphaned orca was last sighted September 30 at the top of Queen Charlotte Strait, traveling with A11, 13 & 56, and with A51 & 61. We’re anxiously awaiting her return next summer.
- “Superpods,” reported off Whidbey Island October 1, near Seattle on November 8 and off San Juan Island, December 3.
- A Dead Fin Whale on bow of tanker at Cherry Pt, WA on October 2; another discovered off Orcas Island on November 5. Both deaths determined to be from ship strikes.
- Transients killed a Minke whale in Ganges Harbor, Salt Spring Island, BC on October 15 while people watched from shore!
- Orcas in Olympia! Many sightings of what were believed to be Transients near Olympia just before Christmas.
- More Transient orcas—Increased sightings in Saratoga Passage and Penn Cove, Whidbey Island (observed making a kill just last week).
- Hood Canal Transients, from January 3 – March 3 a pod of 11 Transients stayed in Hood Canal, munching seals and sea lions.
- L pod goes on Spring Break: March 8, 2003 marked the 2nd known appearance of L pod in Monterey Bay, CA. L71 was photographed and identified, with a pod of 30 orcas.
- (33 members of L and K pods were identified in Monterey in January 2000 for the 1st time).
- March 28 and 29 orcas reported off Ocean Shores, WA; 2 males, ~30 whales.

Travel Trends

Through Whale Sighting Networks, whales may be tracked from one end of the Salish Sea to another. Increased sighting reports help determine trends such as an apparent increase in visits to lower Puget Sound during the months of October through February.

Stranding Network

- With NMFS, WSU Beach Watchers & Matt Klope, NAS Whidbey Wildlife Biologist
- Volunteer training and support
- Respond to dead and live strandings, seal pups
- Have provided 3 porpoise specimens to NMFS

Results and Successes

- Increased whale sighting data, utilized by main whale researchers and agencies
- Ability to assist researchers in locating and tracking whales on survey days
- Increased communication between researchers, agencies, sighting networks, organizations, and citizens
- Increased education and awareness – citizens, media, elected officials, whale watchers
- Large network can assist with situations such as lone orca calves, injured or stranded whales
- Increased shore-based observations of whales, including boat/whale interactions

Challenges

- Sighting Network is a 24/7 Operation.
- Funding the program.
- Ensuring whale sighting information doesn't increase boat traffic around whales.
- Reporting information in a format usable to a diverse group of participants.
- Engaging in lively cyber discussions with this diverse audience and keeping it under control.
- People working with whales tend to be very dedicated and emotionally involved, making it challenging when opinions differ.
- Working through barriers of territoriality.

Future Goals

As Billy Franks mentioned in his talk, we would also like to gather up more people into the circle

- Increased cooperation from ferries, tugs, other maritime industries.
- Increase participation on network across broader geographic region.
- Increased coastal sightings.
- Increased information sharing from researchers, organizations and government agencies.
- Continue networking with whale and other organizations.
- Secure funding to enable the program to continue and expand.

To learn more, visit the Orca Network Web site:

www.orcanetwork.org

- News/Events
- Sightings
- Captivity/Lolita
- Natural History
- Habitat/Salmon

If whales could talk...

They'd say, bring back the salmon, clean up our water, respect and protect us.

Thanks to our sponsors and supporters:

- Puget Sound Action Team
- Earth Island Institute
- Foss Maritime
- and the generous support of our members and contributors

Special Thanks to Ken Balcomb and the Center for Whale Research for 3 decades of dedicated research of the Southern Resident Community.